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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 001697

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KIFR CH

SUBJECT: TIBET: SCHOLARS PRAISE DECISION TO RESTART CONTACT WITH DALAI LAMA, BUT EXPECTATIONS ARE LOW

REF: BEIJING 1618

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor
Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) China's decision to reopen talks with the Dalai Lama's representatives was largely a result of international pressure, Beijing University Sociology Professor Ma Rong (protect), a leading expert on Tibetan social issues, told PolOff. Both sides are under pressure to show some results at the talks, but progress will be extremely difficult to achieve, he suggested. For any progress to occur, Ma predicted, the Dalai Lama will need to compromise on his idea of "greater Tibet." Similarly, Beijing-based scholars at the Government-sponsored Tibetology Research Center described China's decision to agree to consultations as a pragmatic step in response to international opinion. They stressed that the talks remain in a preliminary stage. In line with Government statements, they put the burden for achieving progress squarely on the Dalai Lama's shoulders. Given the wide gulf separating the two sides, these contacts do not expect breakthroughs, but still express hope the restoration of contact can help reduce tensions. End Summary.

"International Pressure A Big Factor"

¶2. (C) Beijing University Sociology Professor Ma Rong (protect), who is a leading expert on Tibetan social issues, said China's decision to restart contact with the Dalai Lama's representatives was largely a result of international pressure. China's leaders, Ma told PolOff April 29, were taken aback, not only by the scale of rioting in Tibetan areas, but also by the unified international reaction and calls for dialogue. The Chinese leadership realized that, in light of the Dalai Lama's clear statements against violence and in support of the Beijing Games, their refusal to talk was making China appear like the obstinate party in the eyes of the international community.

¶3. (C) Ma predicted that, as before, the Communist Party's United Front Work Department will play the lead role in interacting with the Dalai Lama's representatives. However, Ma said, China may involve new, higher-level officials given the gravity of recent events. Both sides are under pressure to show some results at the talks, but progress will be extremely difficult to achieve. For any progress to occur, Ma predicted, the Dalai Lama will need to compromise on his idea of "greater Tibet" (i.e., that all Tibetan areas be included in a future autonomous

Tibetan region) which, Ma said, is an absolute non-starter with Beijing. Furthermore, China will seek a clearer and more concrete explanation from the Dalai Lama about what he means by "true autonomy." Making Tibet an independent territory "like Hong Kong" is also unrealistic, Ma argued. Ma expressed hope that, if the discussions go well, authorities in Tibetan areas will become more tolerant of displays of religious reverence for the Dalai Lama (e.g., displaying his picture in temples and homes). For the near future, Ma said, a simple relaxation of tensions is the most that can be hoped for.

"Continuation of Existing Policy"

14. (C) Three scholars at the China Tibetology Research Center, who met with PolOff as a group April 28, characterized the Chinese Government's decision as a "pragmatic" move, but stressed that it does not represent a break from past policy. Bi Hua, the Center's Vice Director General, told PolOff that China has faced calls from many countries, including the United States, to restart dialogue. However, Bi Hua said the talks that are about to take place should be considered a continuation of the process China began in 1978, when contacts first began between the Chinese leadership and the Dalai Lama's representatives. (Note: This line is in full conformity with the official line on the Chinese offer of talks, namely that it represents the Chinese Government's consistent policy.) Lian Xiangmin, another Center scholar, said the Chinese Government is going against public opinion by reopening talks, noting that Internet bloggers have

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been sharply critical of the decision. That China's leadership is agreeing to contact despite the negative public reaction, Lian claimed, shows Beijing's "sincerity."

"Contact" Not the Same as "Dialogue"

15. (C) Lian and Bi Hua also noted that the terminology the Chinese Government is using to describe the talks is significant. The Xinhua News Agency release, they observed, says China will engage in "contact" (jie chu) and "exchange views" (cuo shang) with representatives of the Dalai Lama. The Chinese Government is avoiding terms like "dialogue" (dui hua) to highlight the preliminary nature of the interaction. The two sides are still trying to understand each other's positions, Bi Hua said. Nevertheless, she continued, the upcoming consultations will allow both sides to raise new issues related to recent events. The Chinese side, she predicted, will use the occasion to enlist the Dalai Lama's help in stopping further "disruptions" to the Olympics. Tanzen Lhundup, Director of the Center's Institute of Sociology and Economics, said the Dalai Lama can ensure progress by taking measures to stop additional violence in Tibetan regions and to distance himself further from hard-line pro-independence groups like the Tibetan Youth Congress. Though Bi Hua, Lian Xiangmin, and Tanzen Lhundup do not expect any breakthroughs, all said they were glad to see the two sides reengage. "Contact," Lian said, "is still better than no contact."

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